



## Helping Your Foster Child Transition to Your Adopted Child



If you're a foster parent adopting a child, children, or youth currently in your care, you'll need to help your child make the emotional adjustment to being an adopted child. While you may appreciate the difference in the child's role within your family, children and youth may not clearly comprehend the difference between being a foster child versus being an adopted child in the same family. There are specific steps you can take to help children understand these changes.

### What's Inside:

- Talking with children about the changes
- Helping children understand their histories and losses
- Helping children cope with trauma and loss
- Helping children transfer attachments
- Conclusion
- Resources



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This factsheet was written for foster/adoptive parents, like you, who are helping their child transition from foster care to adoption.

## Talking With Children About the Changes

The adoption adjustment period can be a vulnerable time as children are confronted with the reality that they will not return to their birth family. While they may have seemed fine and even happy through the foster/adoption process, children may cling to a last hope of reunification. That's why it's important to engage the child in the adoption process and listen carefully to what he or she has to say.

Children often have questions about their birth family, and you may need to address the status of your child's birth family. It is crucial to tell the truth—even when it's difficult—and to validate the child's experiences and feelings. There are several ways adoptive parents and siblings can deal with the feelings about birth families that may arise and, together, help the adopted child or youth integrate and feel secure.

- Acknowledge that adoption is important but that relationships are more important. While the names on paper might be different, the relationships already in place will remain the same.
- Encourage open discussion about any ongoing contact among birth family members, the child or youth, and members of your family.
- Create regular activities, events, or anniversaries to celebrate the adoption. Be sure to discuss the plans with your child to ensure he or she is comfortable with the attention.
- Plan regular events and activities where the focus is not on adoption but on building family memories and relationships.
- Develop relationships with other foster/adoptive children, youth, and families. Sharing common experiences, challenges, and successes will ease the feeling of being isolated or "different" (Adoption Resources of Wisconsin, 2009).

### WHAT IS AN OPEN ADOPTION?

Open adoption, in which some kind of contact is maintained between the adoptive and birth families, may help the child adjust to being adopted. Maintaining contact with the child's relatives may help a child understand the realities of the birth family's situation and ease his or her worries about them. By acknowledging the importance of that relationship, foster/adoptive parents build the child's self-respect and help the child open up about past experiences and start to heal old wounds.

For more information about open adoption, visit the Information Gateway website: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adoptive/contacts.cfm>

Children and youth learn best through repetition. Conversation about the differences between the foster family and the adoptive family may need to be repeated in a variety of ways. It is best if these conversations take place during activities that foster bonding and create memories.

- Help the child talk about the perceived difference in his or her own words. Ask open-ended questions, such as, “How do you think being adopted is different from being in foster care?” or “What do you think the biggest difference is, now that you’re adopted?”
- Help the child draw analogies to something in his or her life. For instance, you might say, “This is like the time when ...”

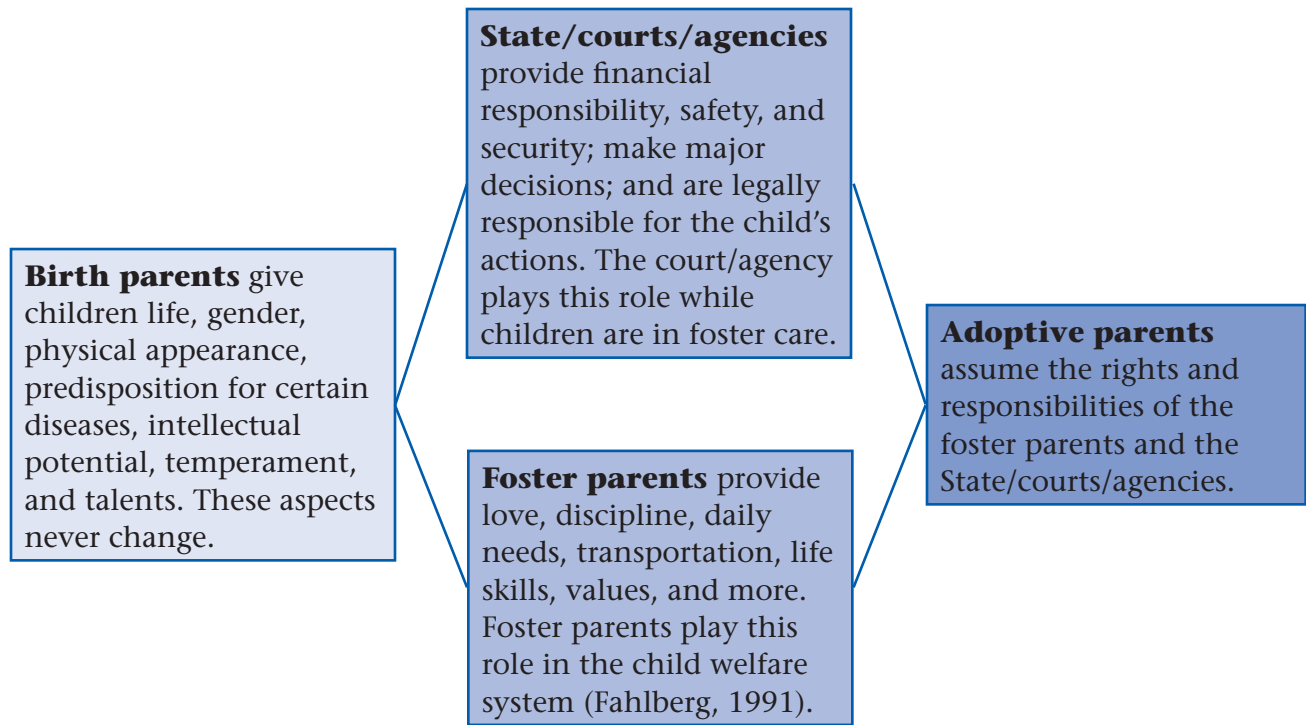
There are a number of changes in status that will affect the child, and these should be discussed, depending on the child’s developmental level.

- To help the child understand **legal differences** between foster care and adoption, you might talk about how the adoption court hearing is different from other court hearings during foster care.

Some parents use marriage as an analogy for adoption and say the court hearing is like a marriage ceremony, and the adoption certificate is like the marriage certificate that makes the relationship legal and permanent. (Be prepared for questions about divorce.)

- Youth might need help in understanding the **financial differences** inherent in foster care and adoption. Adoption assistance payments might be compared to an allowance; older children may be able to understand the payments as costs to meet the child’s needs (Laws, 2004).
- To help children understand **parenting differences** between foster care and adoption, you might remind the child that when in foster care, a permission slip signed by an agency caseworker was required for field trips, sleeping over at a friend’s house, or traveling across State lines. After adoption, *you* can give permission for these activities.

Another way to explain the changes from foster care to adoption is to talk about the roles and responsibilities that different parents and agencies play in a child or youth’s life. (See diagram on following page.)



## Helping Children Understand Their Histories and Losses

When children or youth spend extended periods of time in out-of-home care, memories of significant events and people can be lost. Children may not have a historical sense of self: who they are, where they've lived, the people they lived with, where they went to school, memories of favorite items like stuffed animals or blankets, and more. This can have negative developmental outcomes (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2008). Parents can help children review and understand their previous life experiences to clarify what happened to them in the past and help

them integrate those experiences so they will have greater self-understanding.

### Where Is Your Child on the Permanency Continuum?

Children's answers to the following questions will vary depending on their developmental stage, but their responses can guide you or your child's therapists or social workers in helping your child overcome past traumas and achieve feelings of permanency (Henry, 2005).

- Who am I? (question related to identity)
- What happened to me? (question related to loss and/or trauma)
- Where am I going? (question related to attachment)

- How will I get there? (question related to relationships)
- When will I know I belong? (question related to connection and safety)

For more information about helping your child deal with trauma, visit Child Welfare Information Gateway: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/mentalhealth/common/trauma.cfm>

### Helpful Activities and Resources

Families can help children in answering these powerful questions and in understanding their unique history in many ways. Lifebooks, ecomaps, lifemaps, and lifepaths are tools used by foster/adoptive parents and adoption professionals to help children and youth answer questions about how they came to be separated from their birth family and where, ultimately, they belong. These tools can help children build a bridge between foster care and adoption.

A **lifebook** is an account of the child's life in words, pictures, photographs, and electronic documents. While lifebooks can take many forms, each child's lifebook is unique. You can assist in creating a lifebook by gathering information about a child and taking pictures of people and places that are—or were—meaningful. Working together on a lifebook can bring parents and children together. For free lifebook page samples, visit the Iowa Foster & Adoptive Parents Association website: [http://www.ifapa.org/resources/IFAPA\\_Lifebook\\_Pages.asp](http://www.ifapa.org/resources/IFAPA_Lifebook_Pages.asp)

### WHAT TO INCLUDE IN A CHILD'S LIFEBOOK

- Pictures of the child's birth parents and/or birth relatives and information about visits
- Developmental milestones: first words, first smile, first steps, etc.
- Common childhood diseases and immunizations, injuries, illnesses, or hospitalizations
- Pictures of current or past foster family and extended family members who were/are significant to the child
- Pictures of previous foster families, their homes, and their pets
- Names of teachers and schools attended, report cards, and school activities
- Special activities such as Scouting, clubs, sports, or camping
- Faith-based activities
- What a child did when he/she was happy or excited and ways a child showed affection
- Cute things the child did, nicknames, favorite friends, activities, and toys
- Birthdays, religious celebrations, or trips taken with the foster family

Because a lifebook may contain personal and painful information about the child or youth's past, it is not intended to be shared outside the family. It's merely a resource to help the child cope with the transition from



temporary to permanent care. For more information on lifebooks, visit the Information Gateway website: [http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt\\_parenting/lifebooks.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_parenting/lifebooks.cfm)

**W.I.S.E. UP Powerbooks** help children answer awkward or difficult questions asked by classmates or new friends. Foster care and adoption are nothing to be ashamed of, but questions like, “Why are you in foster care?” can cause added anxiety and stress for children and youth. The W.I.S.E. UP series helps children understand that they have options about how much and what kinds of information to disclose when answering these questions. The books offer example questions and responses.

- W stands for “Walk away.”
- I stands for saying, “It’s private.”
- S stands for “Share” some information about adoption or about one’s own story.
- E stands for “Educate” others about adoption with correct facts.

W.I.S.E. UP Powerbooks and similar resources can be found at the Center for Adoption Support and Education website: <http://www.adoptionssupport.org/pub/index.php>

**An ecomap** is a visual representation of the principal people and activities in a child or youth’s life. An ecomap may have a circle in the middle of the page with a stick figure of a child in it, along with the question “Why am I here?” Lines extend from the circle like spokes to other circles representing the court, other foster families, siblings, school, or to topics such as “things I like to do” to represent what and who is important to

a child and to help the child understand how he or she came to live with the foster/adoptive family.

## SOCIAL MEDIA AND ADOPTION

Social media sites like Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter have changed the face of communication today. Although statistics are not yet available to document the number of adopted people and birth parents who find each other through these sites, anecdotal evidence suggests that it is a growing trend. If your child is a regular user of social media, you may want to explore positive ways to use Facebook and other sites to maintain healthy contact between your child and his or her birth family members.

**Lifemaps** or **lifepaths** are visual representations to help children understand the paths their lives have taken and the decision points along the way. They may include stepping stones to represent a child’s age and a statement about where and with whom they lived at that age.

Meaningful details to include in these tools that will help children understand their histories describe the child’s birth, explain why and how the child entered foster care, and clarify how decisions were made about moves and new placements. If possible, include baby pictures and pictures of birth parents. If no information is available, children can draw a picture of what they might have looked like. Statements such as “There is no information

about Johnny’s birth father in his file” at least acknowledge the father’s existence. Honesty, developmental appropriateness, and compassion are vital for children in explaining difficult and painful circumstances that brought them into foster care.

Working with these tools can give your child ways to experience and work through trauma and feelings of loss and grief.

## Helping Children Cope With Trauma and Losses

It may be difficult to comprehend the experience of past losses your foster child or youth encountered before adoption. Your child may still be grieving because of losses or lost connections with family members. He or she may also suffer from trauma related to those losses. There are often several stages of grief the child must experience before he or she can transfer attachment from the birth family to your family. Adoption experts acknowledge the importance of helping children integrate their previous attachments to important people in their lives in order to transition that emotional attachment to a new family (Fahlberg, 1991; Henry, 2005). Integration is a way of helping children cope with the painful realities of the separation from their birth families.

The five-step integration process below was first described by adoption pioneer K. Donley (1988). The process is an effort to clarify permission messages children and youth receive from their birth families to be

in foster care, to live with new parents, to be loved by them, and to love them back.

### Five Steps to Help Your Child in the Integration Process

1. **Create an accurate reconstruction of the child’s placement history.** Creating a lifebook, lifemap, or ecomap with a child helps a child to see and understand his or her own history.
2. **Identify the important attachment figures in the child’s life.** Foster parents might learn who these important people are by listening to the child talk about people from previous placements. These attachment figures might be parents, but they could be siblings, former foster parents, or other family members. When adoptive families rarely talk about birth families, children or youth may feel the loss more intensely (NACAC, 2009).
3. **Gain the cooperation of the most significant attachment figures available.** If possible, parents should cooperate with the birth parents, grandparents, or other relative to whom the child was attached. Even if the birth family is not happy about a child’s permanency goal of adoption, there is likely one important person (a teacher, a former neighbor) who will be willing to work with you to make a child’s transition easier.
4. **Clarify “the permission message.”** It is necessary for children to hear

and feel from people who are important to them that it is all right to love another family. The primary person in a child's life who is available to give the child that message should be sought out to do so.

- 5. Communicate that permission to the child.** Whether the “permission to love your family” comes in the form of a letter from Grandma or from the birth parent during visits, it is important that children hear from that person that it is not their fault they are in foster care and that it is all right to love another family. This “permission” will go a long way to helping a child relax and transfer his/her attachment to the new family.

For more information on helping your child adapt to grief and loss, visit Information Gateway: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/mentalhealth/common/grief.cfm>

During this transition phase, it's important for parents and others working with the child to use the following skills (Henry, 2005):

- Engaging the child
- Listening to the child
- Telling the truth
- Validating the child's life story
- Creating a safe space for the child
- Realizing that it is never too late to go back in time
- Acknowledging pain as part of the process

## Helping Children Transfer Attachment

While the integration process is about helping the child cope with and accept his or her past, the transfer of attachment is about moving toward the future.

Attachment transfer is not an easy process but it's an important part of the transition from foster child or youth to adoptive child or youth. Children with attachment issues have missed several completions of the attachment cycle, or what is referred to as a disrupted attachment cycle, and it's critical to allow children and youth to experience the cycle with their foster/adoptive family (Keck & Kupecky, 2002/2009).

The diagrams on the next page, adapted from Parents as Tender Healers (PATH)—a curriculum for foster parents, adoptive parents, and kinship caregivers—demonstrate the completed and disrupted attachment cycles (Jackson & Wasserman, 1997).

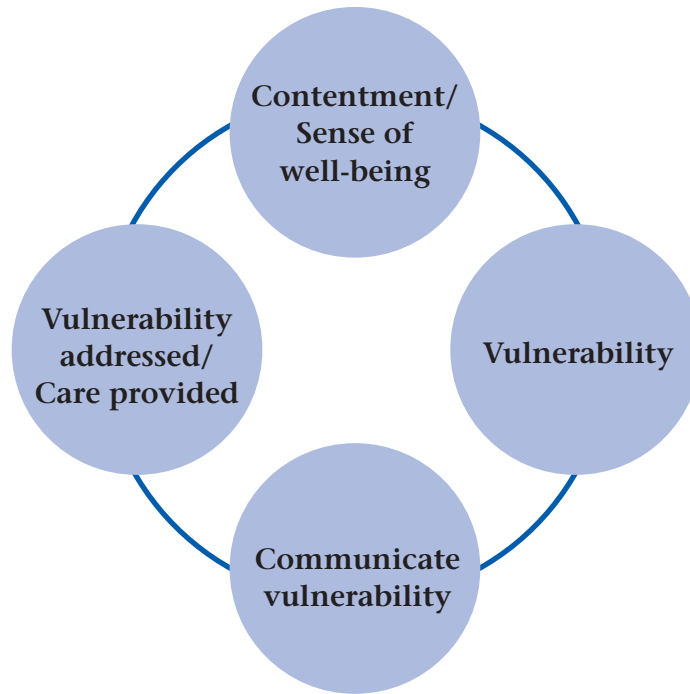
### Relationships and Routines

Relationships and routines are key ways to fortify your child's sense of status within your family and begin the process of transferring and forming attachment to you and your family. Some of these techniques include:

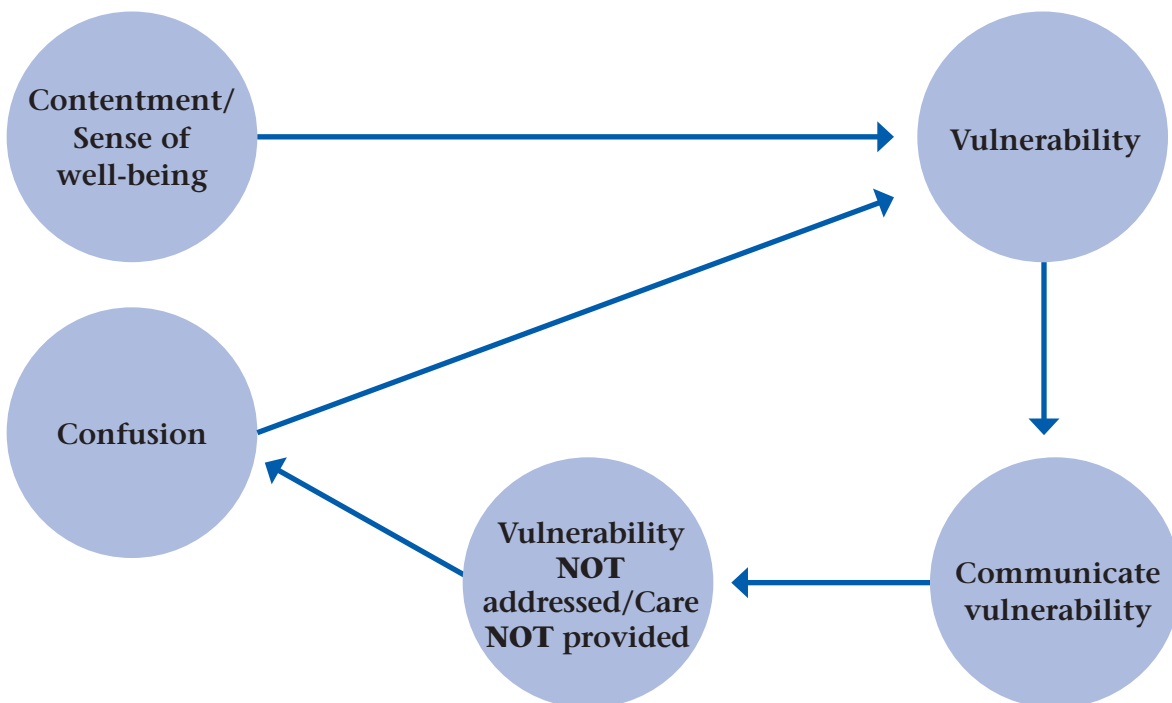
- Be aware of the enormous adjustment the child is making. You, too, are making a huge adjustment but have adult perceptions and skills to handle it.



## Attachment Cycle



## Disrupted Attachment Cycle



- Balance structured activities with unstructured time for conversation, especially during the first few weeks. Use a prop or gimmick such as a family game or talking stick to stimulate conversation as needed.
- Hold family meetings with a time set aside to evaluate “How are we doing as a family?” Encourage honesty and make adjustments as needed.
- Work together to create a written list of family rules. When everyone contributes to creating rules, everyone feels ownership of the rules. Discuss consequences for breaking the rules, procedures for modifying the rules, and family rewards for following the rules.
- As holidays or special occasions approach, encourage your child to discuss what his or her expectations are for the event.
- Incorporate elements of family traditions into your celebrations. Be sure to describe what celebrations with extended family may be like—they may seem overwhelming to your newest family members.

## Conclusion

On the surface, it may seem easy for a child or youth to transition from foster care to adoption within the same family, but in reality, the internal process—both for a child and families—is much more complicated. Allowing children to “drift” into adoption without acknowledging the significant changes may lead to difficulties later.

You need to help your children consider and understand their own histories and the reasons why they cannot live with their birth families, help them adjust to this loss, and help them transfer their attachments to you and your family. In helping children, families will need to consider each child’s needs as they are related to the child’s age, health, personality, temperament, and cultural and racial experiences.

Other foster/adoptive parents can be a great resource for families. The National Foster Care & Adoption Directory has a list of foster and adoptive support groups in each State: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad>

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## Resources

“Adoption Scrapbooks Made Easy” and “Thanks for the Memories,” both by Jenni Colson, published in *Adoptive Families*, offer strategies for developing adoption scrapbooks: <http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/articles.php?aid=1131> and <http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/articles.php?aid=1305>

“Bibliography: Lifebooks for Children and Youth in Foster Care” is a selection of resources on creating lifebooks by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Casey Family Services: <http://www.caseyfamilyservices.org/userfiles/pdf/bib-2009-lifebooks.pdf>

“Birds, Bees, and Adoption,” by Marybeth Lambe, published in *Adoptive Families*, offers tips for adoptive parents on explaining reproduction: <http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/articles.php?aid=772>

Free lifebook sample pages are available through the Iowa Foster & Adoptive Parents Association: [http://www.ifapa.org/resources/IFAPA\\_Lifebook\\_Pages.asp](http://www.ifapa.org/resources/IFAPA_Lifebook_Pages.asp)

“Get Talking,” published online in *Adoptive Families*, provides a number of articles on how and when adoptive parents should talk with their children about adoption: <http://adoptivefamilies.com/talking>

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